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CHALDEAN MAGICIAN

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THE CHALDEAN MAGICIAN

AN ADVENTURE IN ROME

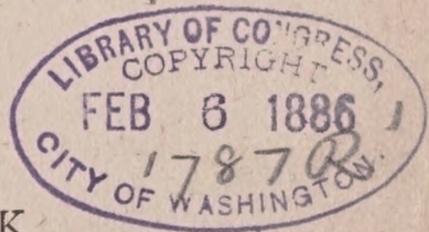
IN THE REIGN OF THE EMPEROR DIOCLETIAN

BY

ERNST ECKSTEIN

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FROM THE GERMAN BY MARY J. SAFFORD



NEW YORK

WILLIAM S. GOTTSBERGER, PUBLISHER

11 MURRAY STREET

1886

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Press of
William S. Gottsberger
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THE CHALDEAN MAGICIAN.

CHAPTER I.

A CLOUDLESS October day, A. D. 299, was drawing to a close; the western sky behind the crest of Mt. Janiculum still glowed with crimson light, but the population in the streets and squares of the world's capital were already moving in a bluish twilight and yellow-red lamps shone, veiled by smoke, from the taverns of the many-gabled Subura.

A youth with a white toga thrown over his shoulders, coming from the Querquetulanian Gate, turned into the Cyprian Way. His manner of walking was somewhat peculiar. Sometimes he rushed hastily for-

ward, like a man impatiently striving to reach his destination; at others he glanced hesitatingly around or stopped a few seconds as though repenting his design. Passing the Baths of Titus he perceived, only a few yards distant, another youth who had entered the Cyprian Way from a side street on the left and with bowed head was pursuing the same direction over the lava stones of the pavement. Looking more closely, he recognized a friend's countenance in the new-comer's pallid features.

It was nearly six weeks since he had seen pleasant Lucius Rutilius; for the two young men's paths in life were entirely different. While Rutilius, the son of a wealthy senator, was fond of moving in the most select circles of the capital, visiting the theatres, the races and combats in the arena, and during the summer spending his time alternately at his country estate in Etruria, the waterfalls of Tibur, the shore of the

gulf of Baiæ, or the strand of Antium, Caius Bononius, the son of a knight, led a somewhat secluded existence in the solitude of his study, allowing himself at the utmost a short trip during the hottest months to the world-renowned Diana's Mirror, the lovely secluded lake in the neighboring Alban Hills, where he owned a modest little garden. Spite of this diversity in external circumstances, the two young men cherished a deeply-rooted friendship for each other. Lucius Rutilius valued the comprehensive knowledge, insatiable thirst for information, and proud independence possessed by Caius Bononius; while the latter knew that Rutilius beheld the splendor of life in the great capital, not with the eyes of the coarse man of pleasure, but with those of the poet; that he revelled in the pomp of color, the luxury of eternal Rome, as the creative artist rejoiced in the effects of light and shade in a landscape; that amid this seething whirlpool

he had preserved a warm heart, a noble unselfishness of nature.

At Caius' call Lucius Rutilius raised his head, covered with black, curling locks, as though startled from a deep reverie. A crimson flush, visible even in the gathering twilight, mounted to his brow, as if the other had caught him in forbidden paths.

"Is it you, Bononius?" he stammered. "Are you, too, to be met in the crowd of pedestrians? True, it's lonely enough here in the aristocratic Cyprian Way to allow you to indulge your taste for seclusion even while walking."

"I have really avoided all society during the last few weeks," replied Caius Bononius, "strange problems have engrossed my attention. But you — what brings you, without any companion, to this quarter of silence at this hour of the day? You used at this time to be reclining at table — with roses from Paestum in your hair and your glowing

lips pressed to an exquisitely-polished murrhine cup, if not on the neck of some radiant young beauty."

Lucius blushed again.

"Things are different now," he replied with his eyes bent on the ground.

"How?" asked Caius Bononius in surprise. "Has my Lucius renounced the delights of the revel and the lustre of flower-wreathed triclinia?"

"Not entirely — but your remark about a young beauty — you needn't smile, Caius! In perfect truth: during the last month a change has taken place in this respect, which — how am I to say. . . .?"

"How are you to speak? As you think! The confusion in your words distinctly shows how hard you are trying to conceal rather than disclose your thoughts. Come, Lucius! Have you so completely forgotten that we did not vow faith and

friendship to each other only over the golden Falernian, that our relations have a deeper root? If things have occurred that influence your character, your views of the world, let me know what has affected you; for as a sincere, though half-superfluous friend, I have a right to your implicit confidence. As I live, you give me the impression that some important matter is in question. Speak, my Lucius! Have you, in contradiction to your whole past, thrown yourself into the study of philosophy? Have you come in contact with some saint of the sect of the Nazarenes and thus acquired a taste for the beautiful legends of the East?"

"Nothing of the sort," sighed Lucius, taking his friend by the arm and drawing him slowly along with him in the direction of the Subura. "You will laugh at me when you learn how your invincible Epicurean has fared at last . . . Yes, you are right,

Caius; it would be foolish if I wished to conceal from you, my faithful friend, what your penetration would nevertheless discover . . . So know — but don't accuse me of weakness—I am desperately in love, not only with my eyes, as before, but body and soul, a second Troilus, a Leander who would breast the surges of every sea to at last clasp his Hero in his arms.”

“You have often talked so,” said Caius smiling.

“Talked, but never felt. The best proof of the genuineness of my emotions — to myself — is the ardor with which I long to lead the beloved maiden across my threshold as my wife. You know ‘marriage’ used to be a terrible word to me, Caius: now, since I have seen Hero — her name is really Hero, and she is the daughter of an aristocratic Sicilian — since that time I have known nothing sweeter than Hymen's torch, and longingly await the moment which,

spite of all difficulties and disasters, must at last unite us."

"Difficulties?" repeated Bononius, pausing. "Does Hero deny her Leander the ardently-desired love? Has the handsome Rutilius for the first time wooed in vain?"

Lucius Rutilius gazed at the western sky as if he were examining the position of the stars.

"There is still time," he murmured, then turning to Bononius, added:

"Wooed in vain? No — yet it is almost the same thing. Does this contradiction seem to you an enigma? If you wish, you shall learn all — only not here, where the passers-by are growing more numerous and a listener might misuse my words. I have business on the northern slope of the Quirinal in about an hour — until then let us stay in my uncle Publius Calpurnius' house, here on the right of the Patrician Way. He is Caius Decius' guest to-day:

we can walk up and down the portico undisturbed—and to be frank, I long to pour out my heart to you, receive your counsel.”

Bononius hesitated. He seemed to be secretly making a hasty calculation.

“Well,” he said at last, “if it won’t occupy too much time . . . You won’t take it amiss, if I tell you that I, too, in an hour at latest”

“Oh—I can explain everything in ten minutes.”

Turning to the right, he drew his friend along with him, and a short time after they knocked at the door of a spacious mansion. The porter drew back the bolt, bowed, and ushered the two youths through the passage into the atrium.

The residence of Publius Calpurnius was one of the huge, luxurious edifices, which seemed to vie in extent with the immense palaces erected by the emperor Dio-

cletian in Salona and Nicomedia. Of no unusual external magnificence and with a moderate façade, it developed directly behind the atrium the most surprising size, stretching on the right and left over the ground naturally belonging to the neighboring houses and spreading towards the slope of the hill. Caius Bononius, who almost intentionally avoided the homes of Roman grandees, often as Lucius — at least in former days — had endeavored to draw his friend into the life and bustle of the capital, scanned with surprise and curiosity the magnificently-decorated structure, the halls of the two court-yards where a dozen gaily-clad slaves were just lighting the candelabra, the brilliant-hued paintings on the walls, the portrait-statues — men in somewhat un-Roman sleeved garments, and women with extremely realistic styles of hair-dressing, which looked as if the latest coiffure of a

fashionable visitor to the circus had served the sculptor for a model.

In fact, Lucius asserted that these styles of arranging the hair were removable, and could be taken from the statues' heads and exchanged for modern ones as fashion required — a triumph of the plastic art, as he ironically added.

So they walked through the second pillared court-yard to the garden. The dusky avenues of trees, whose spreading boughs still permitted enough of the fading daylight to enter to reveal the box-bordered gravelled paths, invited thoughtful, pleasant strolls, and the watchman at the back of the house afforded a sufficient guarantee that no intruder would steal after the youths.

CHAPTER II.

“AT the end of last month,” Lucius Rutilius began, “Hero had firmly resolved to unite her life with mine. I made her acquaintance at Tibur, where her father had purchased Junius’ Gellius’ villa — it adjoins my own, you know — after the death of its first owner. Wandering through the park, I saw the bewitching girlish figure on the opposite side of the wall that divides Gellius’ grounds from mine. Hero was standing in the shade of a laurel-bush, her fair hair adorned simply with a rose, scattering with her dainty little hands crumbs or corn, which she held gathered in her robe, to a fluttering cloud of sparrows. Concealed behind the pedestal of a goddess of autumn, I could watch her quietly without having my presence suspected.

“Ah, my dear Caius, I should vainly try to describe the subtle charm, childlike innocence, and enchanting grace revealed to me in that quarter of an hour! How she chatted with her protégés, repelled the bold and encouraged the timid ones, how she jested and laughed, how her loose tunic slipped from her snowy shoulder—it was bewitching! In short, those fifteen minutes decided my fate. For the first time during a life of twenty-six years I experienced at the sight of a girl who charmed me a feeling of sacred reserve, a sort of reverence that made any wanton thought seem a crime. In my ardent dreams, which instantly twined with eager longing around this lovely apparition, I saw her only as the presiding mistress of my house, the ruler of my life”

“It really appears to be a serious matter,” murmured Caius Bononius. “Does the night-breeze rustling through the boughs

deceive me, or what is it that makes your voice tremble so?"

"Do not doubt!" replied Rutilius. "What I feel for Hero is sacred enough to fill my heart with the emotions that seize devout worshippers at the presence of the goddess. Now hear the rest. Wholly absorbed by one thought, I returned to the house and pondered in solitude over the problem how I might succeed in reaching the desired goal. Usually—as you know—I was not embarrassed when in the society of beautiful girls and women; but here the often-tested art of crafty plans seemed to leave me in the lurch. After twenty absurdly-tasteless ideas I resolved to ask Agathon—who also lived at Tibur—to take me with him as an uninvited guest to the next banquet given by her father, Heliodorus. A pretended desire to talk with him about the sale of a small grove would serve for an excuse. Agathon cast a strange

glance at me when I informed him of my wish. Perhaps this sort of introduction was not the best, though I thought it so; for you, too, will some day learn, spite of all the wisdom that now fills your soul, that love makes even the most experienced people unskilful."

"On the contrary," replied Bononius, "I believe great passions render us inventive."

"We won't argue the point. Inventive perhaps in what is decisive, but foolish in every other respect.—Agathon consented, and on the third day the opportunity offered. Heliodorus received me with the manners of a polished man of the world, greeting me as a neighbor whose acquaintance he had long desired to make. As to the grove, about which I incoherently stammered a few words, he would consider the matter, and if he could really oblige me, would willingly make a sacrifice.

“The banquet passed without my even obtaining a glimpse of the object of my ardent longing; yet I might well be satisfied. From this hour the wall between our two estates was as it were demolished; an intercourse began, which after a short time developed into friendly relations, and now of course Hero, who had retired from the sight of the guests at the noisy drinking-bout, was visible at any hour of the day to the neighbor who came as it were clad in a tunic,* to see her father.

“Let me say nothing about how it all happened. A hundred details gradually wove the certainty that the worthy Sicilian’s daughter favored me, and one evening in the park, on the very spot under the laurel-bush where I had first beheld her, I kissed the words of consent from her quivering lips.

“Those were happy days, Bononius!

* The Romans wore the toga on occasions of ceremony.

We still kept our love concealed; not that we had reason to doubt her father's consent, but there was an indescribable charm in this mystery; I might say: we feared to profane our happiness, if we should draw aside the veil too soon. True, our relations did not wholly escape the excellent Heliodorus' notice. More than once, while wandering by Hero's side through the colonnades of the peristyle, I met his sympathizing smile, which seemed to say: 'Friend, I see through you, but am not angered by your secret suit.'

“Then one evening — we had formed the resolution the day before to appear on the following Friday, October 1st, Heliodorus' birthday, hand in hand before him and reveal everything — Hero received me with an agitated expression that greatly alarmed me. Her father had gone to Rome on business and was not expected to return till late. Hero had been alone all day with

Lydia, a young relative with whom she was educated, had refused old Septimia, her grey-haired confidante, admission to her apartments, neglected to eat, and did not dress until the hour I usually came, when she waited for me on the stone bench under the colonnade of the peristyle. Lydia — a charming creature, by the way, only she reminds one a little too much of our highly-painted fashionable ladies to compare with Hero's divine simplicity — was sitting beside her when I entered. My sweet, sorrowful love was holding a triangular paper in her hand; Lydia, frowning, clenched in her dainty fist a parchment covered with red letters. After long questioning I learned the following details.

“The two girls were walking in the grounds just after sunrise, as they usually did in the morning. Suddenly a hideously-ugly old woman, dressed in rags, stood before the unsuspecting maidens, called three

times in a shrill voice, with the expression of a Gorgon, a prophetic 'woe!' threw a roll at my trembling Hero's feet, and hastily vanished.

"The girls, as if spellbound by this mysterious apparition, took the roll from the ground and untied its fastenings. The contents consisted of a written parchment and a triangular piece of blank paper. The purport of the parchment was as follows :

" 'Olbasanus the Chaldean, the investigator of the future and warner of blinded humanity, writes this to Hero, the daughter of Heliodorus. The gods have announced to us that, inflamed with love for Lucius Rutilius, you cherish the design of accepting him for a husband. Olbasanus warns you against this intention, for his eye has read in the stars what horrible misfortunes threaten you and yours, especially Lucius Rutilius himself, if you carry out your re-

solve. As you might not believe my warning, I send you with this letter a sacred leaf from the book of the god Amun. Carry the page to the hearth, lay it on the stone flags, but so that the flames cannot reach it; bow thrice with clasped hands and await the divine revelation. Amun himself, with invisible finger, will write upon this page from his book and announce what is impending if you despise his sacred will.'

"This was the purport of the parchment Lydia convulsively clenched in her fingers."

During the last few moments Caius Bononius had pressed his friend's arm more closely and showed other tokens of increasing interest.

"Olbasanus?" he now asked, as Lucius Rutilius paused a moment to take breath. "The Chaldean on the Quirinal?"

"The same. His name had already reached my ears, but I now learned for the

first time his ghost-like influence and his power."

"Go on! go on!" urged Bononius.

"Well," continued the other, "this paper had been enough to throw the two girls into the utmost excitement. Lydia — an exception to her sex — had hitherto made no attempt to pry into her friend's secret, although she, too, had long since perceived our relations. Now, when the affair was so suddenly and unexpectedly revealed, she forgot the usual questions, amazement, congratulations. In her heartfelt anxiety she pressed into the rooms occupied by the head cook, impetuously sent away all the slaves, and told her friend to do what Olbasanus had directed. Hero, almost bereft of her senses, bowed thrice over the mysterious page and, after a few seconds, perceived with mysterious horror the black characters that were to announce what barred her happiness. She read: 'To

the father, madness, to the daughter, blindness, to Lucius Rutilius, death.' ”

“ Unprecedented ! ” cried Caius Bononius. “ And a strange coincidence ! ”

“ What do you mean by that ? ” asked Rutilius.

“ Afterwards, my dear fellow ! Let me first hear the end of your adventure ! True, I scarcely need an explanation of the result of the affair. What reply did you make when the young girls had shown you the page from the book of Amun ? ”

“ I tried to doubt — but the spectral letters and my sorrowful Hero's troubled eyes spoke only too distinctly. The fact that this was some strange marvel, an inexplicable miracle, apparently sent by the gods themselves — never wavered. At first I was painfully moved, but in the course of our conversation, as Hero seemed to grow calmer, I regained a certain degree of confidence, and when in the middle of the first

vigil* I entered my house, was disposed, spite of the still unsolved enigma, to regard the whole matter rather as a strange adventure than a misfortune.

“The next day was to undeceive me bitterly. Going into the street at the time of the second breakfast, I saw two large travelling-carriages before the door of the next house. As I was about to ask one of the slaves who held the horses the object of these preparations, Heliodorus and the two young girls crossed the threshold. The Sicilian greeted me and said that he was on his way, with Hero and Lydia, to bid me farewell. Hero, who, as I knew, was a little tyrant, had suddenly declared that she detested Tibur from the very bottom of her soul and longed to go back to Rome, so as it was now so late in the season that he, Heliodorus, had no real reason for opposing

* The Romans divided the time from sunset to sunrise into four night-watches, (*vigiliae*.)

this wish, he had decided with his usual promptness.

“Of course I knew that Hero’s suddenly awakened longing was connected with Ol-basanus. She wanted to seek him, learn farther particulars about the strange prophecy, and if possible appease by prayers and sacrifices the hostile powers that opposed our happiness.

“Ere fifteen minutes had passed the whole party, including old Septimia and some of the household slaves, were seated among the cushions, and preceded by three horsemen, rolling along the road to Rome.

“You will not be surprised, dear Bononius, when I tell you that I, too, left Tibur that very day and returned to the seven-hilled city. With a heavy heart I approached the next morning the superb Hellenic dwelling on the northern side of the Caelian Hill, occupied by Heliodorus. The Sicilian received me cordially and

kindly, though with a somewhat anxious air. Seating myself by his side, I learned that Hero seemed to be ill. Shortly after her arrival she had entered her litter, accompanied by Lydia, returning at a late hour with every sign of agitation. Since then she had lain dejectedly on her couch, scarcely answering a question, but gazing fixedly, with a pallid face, into vacancy. Once she had burst into violent sobs, her whole frame shaken by emotion; then increased depression and exhaustion followed until at last, long after midnight, she fell asleep.

“Of course I guessed what had happened. Hero had been to Olbasanus and had heard from the soothsayer’s lips the same thing the inscription had predicted. Nay, it seemed as if the manner of this confirmation had been far more terrible and demoniac than the first warning by the page from the book of the god Amun. I was

utterly at a loss and, stammering my regret in incoherent words, left the house, begging the Sicilian to inform me when his daughter's health was so far restored that I might repeat my visit without being intrusive.

“On the next evening,” continued Rutilius,—“it was the very Friday we had chosen for the disclosure of our secret, but in my excitement I had entirely forgotten Heliodorus' birthday — I received a few lines from Hero that almost drove me to despair.

“ ‘We must part,’ she wrote, ‘part forever. I had hoped the cruel warning that terrified me at Tibur was only the expression of some hidden resentment which might be appeased. But now I know that the gods themselves bar our way with their destroying curse. I have visited Olbasanus twice: day before yesterday at the dinner hour and yesterday at the commencement of the first vigil. This man — do not doubt

it—holds intercourse with the gods, demons, and the dead; he has been given power over all the realms of spirits! I have heard it with these ears, seen it with these eyes! When, after manifold proofs of his omnipotence, I still doubted—alas, only because I shrank from despair—at a sign from the terrible man the goddess of death, Hecate herself, appeared to me in the clouds of the night heavens, and in a voice like the roaring of the storm, repeated the awful words I had read on the page of Amun. We must part, Lucius, not for my sake—oh! how gladly would I bear the curse of blindness, if I might win in you a higher, purer light—but for yours, to whom cruel Hecate predicts death, and for love of my dear father, whose mind is threatened with darkness. Farewell, dear Lucius! May you learn to forget more easily than I!

“These were the words engraved upon

my heart in indelible, torturing characters, as if written by a red-hot stylus. I now learned from my slave Gaipor, that Olbasanus was really considered by thousands of people the most powerful conjurer among all the Chaldeans of the seven-hilled city. Gaipor himself, before I bought him, had been sent to the magician by his mistress, a lady from Neapolis, to enquire about the future, and had beheld with his own eyes, like Hero, the terrible apparition of Hecate, who, surrounded by flames, soared across the starry sky. You know, Caius, I am not very credulous. I've often laughed at our augurs* and soothsayers, and paid the homage of my sincere respect to that general in the time of the Republic, who when the sacred chickens would not eat, flung them into the sea. But here conviction pressed upon me with such power that I succumbed to its force”

* Priests paid by the government, who predicted future events.

“Hecate!” murmured Caius Bononius. “This marvel was attested to me also, not by one or two persons who had beheld it, but by twenty. Know, Rutilius, that for months I have been reckoning what this Olbasanus accomplishes by means of his league with gods and demons But you had not finished your story. Go on, Lucius; but make haste!”

“I have finished,” replied the youth. “There’s only one thing more to add. Amid the dull, heart-corroding grief that mastered me, the desire to visit in the hall of his incantations, the man who had destroyed my future — though with kind intentions — daily became more uncontrollable. I, too, wished to ask the terrible queen of the underworld a question. Every effort to see my beloved Hero again was unavailing. Heliodorus, too, seemed completely transformed — his frank bearing had become so timid and constrained. The

impossibility of speaking to Hero, or even Lydia, drove me to carry my desire into execution. Nay, I conquered my repugnance to any contact with the supernatural—and now, oh! Caius, you behold me on my way to Olbasanus, firmly resolved to see with my own eyes what the gods have allotted and at least to bear away the one consolation that lies in the consciousness of immutability and eternally predestined fate.”

“On your way to Olbasanus!” cried Caius Bononius passionately. “Well, then, let us not delay! I, too, am about to seek him. I sent my Glabrio yesterday, and Olbasanus appointed the second hour after sunset”

“You, too?” asked Lucius in surprise.

“Yes, I, too—though from different motives, my dear Rutilius. I am a philosopher, you know. For years I have searched and investigated; I am acquainted with the manifold appearances of animate and inani-

mate nature; I don't believe in this conjuror's wonderful phantasmagoria. No matter, the testimony of many truthful men lies before us, I cannot doubt that they have faithfully and honestly related what they heard and saw. So a torturing contradiction results. Either I am mistaken in denying, with Pliny and Lucretius, the interference of demons in the affairs of men, or all these truthful people deceive themselves and are the victims of base, unprincipled fraud. Impelled by my curiosity, I am determined, so far as possible, to decide this question one way or another. So come, that I may not miss the hour Olbasanus has appointed."

Lucius Rutilius felt a thrill of joyful fear. A gleam of hope flashed through his soul, for his friend's words, spite of their measured reserve, expressed strong confidence.

"Let us hurry!" he said, trembling with impatience.

So the two friends went back into the house, and passing around the Viminal Hill by the side of the Tullian wall, turned towards Olbasanus' dwelling.

CHAPTER III.

NOT far from the enormous Baths which the Emperor Diocletian,—as if to atone for preferring to reside in Nicomedia or Salona rather than in Rome,—had had built on the northeastern slope of the Viminal as far as the spot where the height merges into the Quirinal, there stood near the Collina Gate a singular structure, almost recalling in the ponderous splendor of its brilliantly-painted façade the royal palaces of Assyria and Persia, yet as fresh and new as if it had just emerged from the hands of architect and workmen, an architectural embodiment of the taste of an age which had a fancy for cleverly imitating the style of by-gone times, not only in the weak creations of a degenerate literature, but in other departments of human activity.

True, in this instance it had not been the architect's whim or his employer's taste, but a definite, practical purpose that had replaced the simple façade of the Roman dwelling by this fantastic luxury of the East. Behind the ponderous pillars adorned with heads of animals, Olbasanus, the Chaldean enchanter and conjuror of evil spirits, the declared favorite of the Roman ladies, practised his mysterious arts,— and thus the exterior of the spacious structure harmonized with the strange events that occurred within. The foreign aspect of the front might be regarded as a preparation for the chosen ones whom Olbasanus permitted to cross the threshold of his secret sanctuary.

Lucius Rutilius and Caius Bononius reached the door at the very moment it was opened from within, allowing a tall, thin figure, wrapped in a thick paenula, to pass into the street. Spite of the mild weather,

the stranger had drawn over his head the hood worn as a protection from the rain.

Stepping a little aside, the two youths made room for the disguised figure.

“I ought to know that gait and bearing,” said Lucius Rutilius, looking after the hurrying form; but he vainly strove to recollect. Meantime the porter had not closed the door, but holding a lantern of chased silver with panes of oiled papyrus, admitted the two visitors.

Caius Bononius gave him a silver coin and asked if the Chaldean could be seen, according to his appointment.

The porter beckoned to one of the seven bearded Ethiopians who, clad in long robes confined around the hips by wide girdles inscribed with strange characters, stood waiting at the entrance of the corridor, and the man thus summoned silently led the new arrivals through the wainscoted ante-room. As he moved forward almost

without a sound, the train of his cowl-like robe rustling softly over the floor, holding in his right hand a torch that cast spectral shadows on the countless joints and projections of the masonry, he himself seemed a supernatural being, well calculated to make a mysterious, agitating impression upon sensitive souls. The way led through a double row of short, heavy columns to a staircase whose basalt steps extended downward to a subterranean passage, just high enough to permit a tall man to walk upright under the ragged arch cut in the forms of stalactites. The smoke from the torch floated in horrible shapes along the roof. A heavy, oppressive atmosphere prevailed. On the right and left, in black cavities, lay an endless number of skulls. After a time the corridor turned; a second gallery opened, from which branched a third and fourth. At last the young men lost all idea of the direction in which they were

going. Lucius Rutilius thought they must have long since reached the other side of the hill; Caius Bononius, on the contrary, was disposed to believe that the staircase which now led them into a spacious, dimly-lighted room, was not very far from the entrance flight at the end of the pillared corridor.

The apartment they entered was a masterpiece in the effective use of architectural, plastic, and decorative ornament. When the Ethiopian had retired with his blazing torch and let down the iron trap-door at the top of the stairs, the two youths at first supposed themselves to be in total darkness. True, a tiny pale-blue flame was burning at the back of the room in a candelabrum about the height of a man; but the rays it shed through the vast chamber were not sufficient to show eyes dazzled by the torch-glare anything more than the glimmering outlines of huge, ponderous

masses. By degrees, however, their vision became accustomed to this feeble light, and Caius and Lucilius discovered the elliptical arrangements of huge pillars, behind which ran a deep corridor that looked almost black. Only a pallid glimmer between the shadows of the columns showed that on the other side of this corridor extended a wall, following the line of the room within. Twelve of the pillars — that is, one-third of the whole number — which were directly opposite to the entrance, were artistically draped with countless floating black hangings, between which hung all kinds of chains, cords for suspending lamps, and other accessories, carefully arranged in such a manner as not to weaken the impression of height and space.

The ceiling of the room was slightly arched, but its construction, owing to the extreme height, could not be distinguished. At the end of the apartment, in front of the

candelabrum, was a large square altar, also hung with dark cloth. Tripods, brazen monopodia* covered with all kinds of strange utensils, low stools, and various unrecognizable articles were arranged in symmetrical order on both sides. In the centre of the floor lay a rug about thirty feet square, painted or interwoven with mysterious figures; on each corner stood a candlestick even taller than the candelabrum at the end.

The young men had about five minutes' time in which to examine their surroundings by the dim light of the livid flame, then there was a sound like the distant notes of an Aeolian harp and, without their knowing how and whence he came, Olbasanus stood behind the cloth-draped altar.

“You do not come alone, Caius Bononius!” he said, in a musical voice. “No matter — I know. Most mortals cherish

* Citron-wood tables, with an ivory foot.

scruples about approaching, relying solely on their own strength, the rooms where the gods are to reveal themselves directly and indirectly. Let your companion, whoever he may be, also draw near; his quiet, devout presence will not disturb the Chaldean's work."

"You are mistaken, Olbasanus," replied Caius Bononius, "the person accompanying me is the one who longs to address a question to the goddess. I, Caius Bononius, only sent my messenger to you in behalf of this youth; for, I confess, I never felt a desire to lift the veil from the future."

"I am mistaken," replied Olbasanus, "That is the lot of all human beings, and mine also, so long as I speak to you only as a feeble and perishable man. The favor of the gods, when I appeal to them, first casts into my soul the light that renders any error impossible. Well! Olbasanus is disposed to grant your wish, though as a man

he cannot understand what could induce you to use this evasion."

"The reasons are of small importance," replied Bononius.

"Then you probably desire to have your companion's name remain concealed from the prophet?"

Caius Bononius exchanged a hasty glance with his friend, then turning to Olbasanus, replied:

"If it is agreeable to you, yes!"

The Chaldean seemed to hesitate a few seconds.

"Greater power is required of the magician's art when the questioner conceals his name," he said slowly; "but since you earnestly desire"

"We beseech it!" replied Bononius.

The Chaldean now came with measured pace from behind the altar.

"Granted!" he said solemnly.

Then he stretched out his hand, in

which gleamed a small ivory wand. Instantly the spacious room glowed with a light as bright as that of day. Lamps not only burned in all the candelabra—but even between the pillars flames seemed to spring from the ground; shallow vessels appeared in which jets of light blazed steadily.

The two youths were almost blinded by the spectacle of this transformation. Lucius pressed his hand to his brow as if bewildered; Caius stood motionless, apparently scrutinizing, considering, examining. At last a smile of satisfaction flitted over his face. He seemed to have found the solution of this enigma, while Rutilius was still enthralled by the impression the miracle produced.

“Approach,” said the Chaldean in sonorous tones. “Stranger, what do you desire to know?”

Again the youths exchanged a glance; then Rutilius said:

“ I would fain learn what the gods have allotted to me, in case I fulfil the most momentous and important design of my life.”

Olbasanus delayed his answer as before. At last he replied :

“ I fear that is more vague than the gods permit. Can you not put your question more clearly ; mention, without reserve, the design of which you speak ?”

Rutilius felt Bononius secretly touch his arm.

“ No,” he said quietly. “ I beg you to try whether an answer cannot be obtained, even without a more exact definition.”

Olbasanus looked upward. A ray like a flash of lightning darted down.

“ Granted,” he said, turning to Rutilius. “ By all the terrors of the nether world, you are a favorite of the gods ; they bestow such marked kindness only on the chosen ones whom they wish to bless. They

usually punish distrust of their interpreter by perpetual silence.”

The two youths were growing more excited every instant; Lucius, because the Chaldean's grave, dignified manner seemed a warrant for the earnestness and truth of what he was about to announce; Caius Bononius, because he was greatly disappointed,—he had been perfectly sure the magician would say that Lucius' wish was not allowable.

Olbasanus now touched the altar with his wand. A clear note, like that produced by striking metal, echoed through the room, and a boy clad in white entered through the curtains at the right. He carried a brazier filled with red-hot coals, which he placed on one of the brass stools beside Olbasanus.

“Bring in the victim,” said the Chaldean.

The lad withdrew. Olbasanus seized a

shovel, filled it with burning coals and carried it to one of the tripods, on which he carefully spread them, then returning to the altar raised his hands.

“Hecate!” he said in a hollow tone, “Mistress of the Nether World, Princess of Darkness and Shadows, Ruler of Demons and Departed Spirits, omnipotent, awful goddess! Neither primeval fate, nor any of the higher gods opposes what we design. So I implore thee to graciously grant what Olbasanus timidly whispers. Disclose the future to this youth, quench his thirst for the unfathomable, fill his eyes with clear vision, and teach him what ghosts and demons from east to west impart to thee. If thou art disposed to favor him who, like so many hundred others, appeals to thee, stir thy sacred element; let thy spirit fan the fiery flame and animate it with thy immortal breath!”

After these words he advanced a few

steps to the tripod and gazed intently at the glowing coals. Lucius and Caius had also approached. Suddenly the bits of coal began to move slowly. There was a surging and seething, as if the force of some unknown vitality pervaded the blazing brands, until at last the movements grew weaker and finally ceased.

The Chaldean stepped back, folded his arms, and bowed.

The white-robed boy now appeared, leading a black lamb by a rope that glistened like silver. Binding the animal firmly to the altar, he approached the two youths and offered them an onyx dish. His attitude was unmistakable. Lucius took some gold coins from the purse hanging at his belt and placed them in the vessel. The boy thanked him and again retired behind the curtain.

Olbasanus, holding his magic wand in his right hand and pressing the left on his

heart, lowered his eyes, saying to Lucius Rutilius :

“ Kneel, my son. According to ancient custom we will slaughter a black animal to the goddess of the Under World. Pray that the holy rite may succeed! The entrails of the beast, inspired by Hecate’s divine breath, will announce to us what we are striving to know — not in mysterious symbols, which require interpretation, but in plain characters that are familiar to human eyes. Victim of Hecate, die!”

He raised the wand over his head. The black lamb fell as if struck by lightning. Directly after, two attendants on the sacrificial rites appeared — pallid youths clad in Greek chitons and Persian trousers, with gay kerchiefs bound about their heads.

“ Stranger,” — Olbasanus turned to Lucius, — “ approach and touch the animal which has succumbed to the attack of my helpful demons.”

Lucius Rutilius, who was growing more timid and faint-hearted every moment, advanced. The animal's limbs were already stiff. As the youth grasped the woolly fleece, the lamb's head fell back, showing the glazed eyes.

The attendants removed the rug from the altar-slab and laid the victim on it; while Lucius Rutilius held the beast's fore-foot clasped in his left hand, one of the youths gave the Chaldean the knife. The lamb was opened and Olbasanus, muttering all sorts of magic formulas, removed the heart and the liver. The next moment the animal was taken away and the altar cleansed from the blood by large linen cloths dyed black.

Olbasanus held the heart and liver in his outstretched left hand until the slaves had put a brazen plate on the altar, then laying the entrails on the metal, he waved his wand and said to Lucius:

“Approach and read!”

At these words a sound like the roll of thunder echoed through the room. Lucius Rutilius, with a throbbing heart, bent over the plate. There, in the centre of the still-smoking liver, appeared in distinct Greek letters :

ΘΑΝΑΤΟΣ — Death.

The young patrician staggered back.

“Death!” he murmured, as if benumbed.

Caius Bononius had also advanced to read the large, somewhat irregular characters of the prophecy. Panting for breath, he gnawed his lips, frowned, and clenched his fist, as if he needed some physical means to help him resist the impression of this incomprehensible miracle. He acknowledged to himself that he lacked any explanation for it; yet his clear, unprejudiced reason rebelled against what his eyes could

not deny. He touched the writing with his finger — it did not wipe off. That Olbanus had not written it himself, either before or while he placed the liver on the metal plate, Caius Bononius could swear by all the gods. Already a troubled “If it should be true?” was darting through his mind, when glancing aside he detected the almost imperceptible smile with which the magician was watching the sceptical examination of the inscription. To the young man’s penetration this smile contained a singular meaning. It was not the lofty expression of pity and divinely-bestowed power, which in the full possession of its sacred might looks condescendingly down upon the bewildered doubter; but the crafty smile of the Greek who has succeeded in defrauding his foe of a piece in the game of draughts, or the daring adventurer who has accomplished a bold deed and successfully effaced every trace of his action. Thus, in this strange fashion,

the philosopher, where logic left him in the lurch, drew fresh power of resistance from the domain of feeling; the instinct that led him to consider the affair trivial because the person was suspicious.

“Do you still doubt, Caius?” whispered Lucius with quivering lips. “Come; I know enough now. How I shall bear it remains in the hands of the gods.”

“I doubt more than ever,” replied Bononius. “The day will come when I shall unravel this mystery. Now, I beseech you, don’t desert me and above all yourself and your hopes so unceremoniously. Put more questions to him, ask for other signs! They say he makes the goddess’s voice speak from a skull; and Heliodorus’ daughter herself wrote to you that the magician brought Hecate’s flaming form from the night-heavens. Outweigh his marvels with gold, but let him do what he can, for the sake of truth and the prosperity of your happy future. I

now long more than ever to behold — and be able to despise — all his arts.”

“You are blaspheming, Caius!” said the startled Lucius. “Suppose the terrible goddess, the destroyer of my life, should punish you!”

“Punish me? For what? If it *is* she, she ought to be grateful to me for revealing the abuse of her name; but it is not, otherwise she would have dragged yonder fellow into the eternal gulf long ago.”

A pause ensued. Olbasanus seemed to be secretly gloating over the impression his prophecy had produced on the two young men, for he imagined that Caius Bononius’s whispered words were the expression of wondering anxiety.

“The Mistress of Night has prophesied death to me,” Rutilius at last began. “But one thing still weighs on my mind. May I be permitted to question farther?”

“Question,” replied Olbasanus.

“Then I would fain know whether this destiny can be averted by no sacrifice, no deed of expiation. If it is in your power, let me learn this. Implore the goddess to pronounce the oracle to the questioner in her own terrible voice.”

As before the Chaldean looked upward; as before lightning flashed; and raising his wand he exclaimed:

“Granted!”

Again he drew from the altar the mysterious metallic sound that summoned the white-robed boy. At an unintelligible order from the Chaldean, the lad went to a monopodium that stood near and took from it a little casket set with gems, which he placed beside the magician. Then the onyx vessel again appeared, and Lucius Rutilius's gold coins fell rattling within. Directly after the dark curtain between the two pillars behind the altar was drawn aside, revealing a semicircular niche lighted by a

bluish lamp. The wizard took from the casket a small vessel, whose contents he burned on the brazier of coals. A fragrant smoke rose to the ceiling, and at the same moment all the lights went out except the bluish lamp, whose glimmering rays showed a grinning skull on the floor of the niche.

Olbasanus beckoned to the questioner. Resting both hands on the altar, Lucius Rutilius was to gaze into the ghostly niche and hear the decree of the terrible goddess. As Caius Bononius also wished to see and hear, he, too, was obliged to grasp the edge of the altar with his right hand.

“Be silent and vanish, ye spirits and demons,” the Chaldean now began in a mysterious tone. “Be silent and vanish, for Hecate, the Inscrutable, will herself speak to this creature of the dust through the symbol of her omnipotence, the skull on the floor of her sanctuary. The fleshless, brainless skeleton, once the seat of thought,

the extinct lamp of a long-forgotten human life, will serve the Invisible One for an abode when she rises from the depths of the nether-world. Announce to me, Omnipotent One, has the breath of thy divine life entered this mouldering shell?"

A hollow, horrible: "Thou sayest it," echoed from the lofty forehead of the skull.

Lucius Rutilius started violently. Caius Bononius thought himself deceived in the direction from which the voice came, and leaning forward listened breathlessly.

Olbasanus had bowed his face upon the altar, as if the presence of the immortal goddess bent his head in timid reverence. Now he slowly rose.

"Be merciful unto us, Thou Mistress of all!" he said, extending his hands towards the niche as if imploring protection. "This youth desires to know whether the destiny thy sternness predicts is as inevitable as a

decree of fate, and if not — what he must do to avert the terrible doom.”

After a pause the voice again echoed from the skull: “His fate is inevitable if he executes what he has planned,” came from the horrible cavity in a whisper so distinct that even Bononius could no longer doubt. “In resignation lies the sole salvation of his life. This, Hecate, who removes all that her breath has touched, announces to him.”

With these words a terrible peal of thunder resounded through the hall. The skull in the niche began to stir, and — incredible marvel — grow smaller, like a cloud in the evening sky which gradually melts into nothing. The two young men gazed fixedly at the mysterious phenomenon. Two minutes more, and the skull had entirely vanished from the shining floor — it had not sunk into the earth, but, as it were, fallen to pieces, blown away, dissolved in smoke like a phantom.

When Caius Bononius looked up, he saw his friend lying apparently lifeless on the altar steps.

“It is all over,” he murmured, pale with horror, as Bononius touched him on the shoulder.

For a time Caius left the sorrowing youth to his despair. Olbasanus, who was probably accustomed to such scenes, waited silently a few steps off.

“Lucius,” the young sage began after a little hesitation, “consider only one thing! The gods, if they exist, must be regarded as the incarnation of everything that is sublime. But the nobler, purer, and therefore more akin to the gods a man’s nature is, the more decidedly he is repelled by the horrible and ghostly. The very idea of divinities, even of a deity ruling the realm of death, forbids us to believe incidents such as we have just witnessed to be the expression of their will. I, too, cannot guess this

Chaldean's enigmas; but I doubt with all the power of my mind that they are what he declares them to be. Do you also doubt, Lucius! Own to him that you do; don't spare your money, and ask fresh testimony. Your Hero, you said, *saw* the goddess of death; do you, too, request a sight of her, in order either to believe implicitly or find the lever by which you can overthrow all these incomprehensible things."

This time there was some delay before Lucius Rutilius could be persuaded. But at last, becoming more and more influenced by his friend's calmness, he yielded and made the request Bononius directed.

Olbasanus's penetration had long since anticipated this turn of affairs. He silently led the two youths through half-a-dozen paths running in different directions across the dark park. Situated on a gently-rising hill, the magician's garden covered a square of several hundred feet, which was enclosed

like a sanctuary by walls almost as high as a house, and overgrown with ivy and other climbing vines. Here and there fountains played in alabaster basins; strange statues, looking like pallid shades in the starlight of the moonless night, stood, like spectral guards amid the shrubbery. Ancient evergreen-oaks and plane-trees spread their many-branching crowns.

In the centre of the grounds was a circle about sixty yards in diameter. Here the magician paused with his companions.

“Your wish is a presumptuous one!” he said to Lucius Rutilius. “Only in rare cases does the goddess grant so insolent a desire. But you, I repeat, seem to be chosen as an object of her special favor. Hecate”—he folded his arms across his breast — “wills it, and will appear to you. Nay, she will even tolerate the presence of him who stands as a sympathizing friend by your side. But—I warn you! Remember

Semele, who wished to behold Zeus in all his Olympian majesty and was consumed in anguish in his arms. True, death and destruction will not come to you from the sight of the Inscrutable One, for she appears of her own free will, not constrained by any oath binding upon the gods. But even thus the vision will confuse your mind and senses, stir your heart with dread and horror. Surrounded by scorching flames she will cross the starry sky, visible only to your eyes and mine, and overwhelming awe will stream from her shoulders like rain from a thunder-cloud. Never will you be able to efface this terrible spectacle from your memory. Therefore, do not brave the crushing vision too long! As soon as you have once beheld it, bow your head in reverence and hide your face with your trembling hands. No question to the Immortal One is needed. Her voice has already announced that your destiny is fixed; there-

fore she will come from the left, from the regions of the west, and flame across to the east. If her own favor and mercy could avert this fate — and she alone in rare cases can loose bonds the fettered one himself could rend by no sacrifice, no atonement — she would rise from the right like the sun and vanish towards the left. Now, —are you prepared?”

“We are,” replied Rutilius.

Olbasanus threw himself on the ground. Gently striking his forehead thrice against the hard trodden earth, he cried in a tone of despairing fervor:

“Hecate, Princess of the Nether World, Mistress of all that has breath, show thyself to the eyes of this chosen youth, and, if it is possible for thee, rise from the regions of the east.”

Suddenly a strange, ghostly rustling echoed on the air, a whirring like the distant sound of mighty wings. A blazing

fiery glare flamed in the sky — but from the west. The apparition crossed the heavens with furious speed, — half concealed by the boughs of a row of lofty elms.

“Hide your faces, unhappy men!” the Chaldean had shouted at the first ray of light, and in tones so sharp, so full of real terror, that Lucius Rutilius involuntarily obeyed.

Even Caius Bononius had shrunk back and did not look up fairly and steadily until the fiery vision had already sunk far in the east behind the dark horizon.

Lucius Rutilius, half fainting with excitement, was led away by Olbasanus and Caius Bononius. The Chaldean interrupted a question from the latter by the quiet remark:

“The time Olbasanus placed at your disposal has long since elapsed. Other grief-laden mortals are already impatiently awaiting his aid.”

At the end of five minutes Lucius Rutilius had recovered sufficiently to set out on his way home with the young philosopher. When Caius Bononius, on reaching his friend's house, held out his hand, whispering: "Calm yourself, Lucius," he received no reply. Staggering like a drunken man Lucius hurried through the passage leading from the door to the atrium, and sought his couch, to lie awake all night.

Caius Bononius also found himself indescribably agitated. The gulf between what he had witnessed and what his reason and judgment had long since decided concerning the nature of things and the meaning of the world was too irreconcilable, not to lead the mind of one so eager in the pursuit of knowledge to try to restore in some way the interrupted harmony. Until early dawn he paced by lamplight up and down his study or the peristyle, searching, weighing, and rejecting, till at last, almost tired

to death, he flung himself, still in his toga and tunic, upon his couch and fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV.

FROM the time of his visit to Olbasanus Lucius Rutilius, who had previously constantly endeavored to obtain a meeting with his beloved Hero to cheer the sorrowing girl and induce her to change her desperate resolve, was completely transformed.

Gifted with a larger share of imagination than of calm, unprejudiced investigation; endowed with genuine poetic receptivity for all external impressions, he doubted neither the honesty of the mysterious Chaldean, nor the truth of what he had heard and seen.

As Caius Bononius was unable to give

any natural explanation of the marvels they had witnessed, his efforts, when he visited his friend the next day and earnestly endeavored to weaken, as far as possible, the impressions of the preceding evening, remained unavailing.

Since Rutilius was now convinced that the ardently-desired union with his beloved Hero would inevitably bring destruction, not only to himself but to her and her dear father, duty and honor seemed to him to command that he should not render the unavoidable separation more difficult by delay and hesitation, but accomplish it at once through a heroic resolve. Even one more interview — a last farewell must be avoided — on this point he now agreed with the woman he loved. The arrows that had pierced so deeply into their yearning hearts must be torn out by force; only thus, under the merciful protection of the gods, deliverance might yet be possible; if not for

him—for he felt that without Hero life, even amid all the splendors of the world, would lack light and color—perhaps for her, who could forget, who ought and must forget, though the very thought made the youth tremble.

He therefore wrote to Hero briefly, that he, too, had heard the decree of the goddess of death and was convinced that the inexorable will of Fate stood between them—so he would resign her. With what feelings he did so, he need not explain. As he wished her to regain her peace of mind, he informed her that he could not remain longer in Rome, where he should run the risk of meeting her and thus being reminded afresh of the happiness he had forever lost. He would leave the Capital the following day, without naming the goal of his journey, that not even her thoughts should follow him.

Lucius carried out this resolution with

the haste of a man who hopes to fly from himself.

Accompanied only by a single slave, he rode at dawn northward across the Milvian Bridge — towards Etruria, to pass by Pisae, renowned of old, to Gaul. He had visited none of his numerous friends before leaving except Caius Bononius, to whom he named Massilia* as the place where he intended to remain for a few months. He had in that city, in the person of an Arpinatian knight, a host who would receive him with open arms.

* * *

Meantime Caius Bononius was haunted night and day by the feverish desire to see clearly into the tangled web of the events he had experienced.

If the marvellous incidents at the Chal-

* Marseilles.

dean enchanter's house had been less numerous ; if — with all their apparent reality — they had not borne a certain theatrical impress, Bononius would have been disposed to enter more seriously than ever into the question : Is there really a higher spiritual power that rules the souls of the departed, and are there men who, in consequence of the peculiar nature of their mental faculties, are capable of entering into mutual relations with this higher power ?

The studies in which Bononius had been engaged contradicted the truth of such a hypothesis ; they did not yield the smallest fact that could be construed in favor of it. Yet, — it is the brain most free from prejudice, the brain that has learned how often the impossible proves true, which is therefore the first to be ready to examine impartially what is strange and contradictory instead of unceremoniously refusing it authority with the cheap cleverness of aver-

age minds. The true thinker does not reject what lies beyond the pale of experience, but simply what is logically inconceivable.

Thus Olbasanus would have obtained undisputed success with Caius Bononius if instead of *three* amazing miracles he had displayed only one. But the instinct that was instantly aroused when Bononius detected the magician's triumphant smile gave him no rest; with the zeal of the investigator who hopes to make a discovery that will move the world, the young philosopher strove to find the most natural and simple explanation possible for the bewildering phenomena. . . . A hundred times he fancied he had grasped the truth by the wing, but it constantly escaped him, and the joyous gleam of hope proved illusive.

There were two circumstances that gave him food for reflection.

In the first place, even with the most comprehensive knowledge of all the powers

of nature, it was not to be explained how the answer to Lucius Rutilius's question, which Olbasanus did not know, agreed so exactly with the reply to Hero's. The second circumstance appeared no less perplexing. If this Olbasanus was really a juggler, who deceived his victims for his own selfish designs, what could have been more opportune than a final compliance with Lucius Rutilius's wishes? The Chaldean might have imposed any penance on the sorrowing youth, and if he had only wanted money, named a very considerable sum by whose payment to the goddess's representative the pretended fate could be averted. But there was nothing of the sort. Olbasanus's goddess persisted, with the inexorable severity of Fate, in the prophecy already made by the writing on the entrails of the victim. This fact told very decidedly in the sorcerer's favor. What interest could the man be pursuing when, against his bet-

ter judgment, he destroyed a lover's hopes, since their restoration undoubtedly promised to be far more profitable to the sooth-sayer.

The youth could find no explanation for these things.

One day — about a week after Lucius Rutilius's departure — he was walking through the avenues of the Campus Martius. Caius had long neglected this afternoon exercise of several hours before dinner; now, when his head was burning from the constant restlessness of his excited thoughts, he had resumed the old custom, and to-day, for the fourth time, set out on his usual walk to the so-called *Septae*, the place where the ancient assemblies of the people were held, past the spreading boughs of the double row of maples, whose rustling foliage already began to assume the brilliant hues of autumn.

Spite of the lateness of the season the

air was as soft and mild as that of spring. A brilliant throng filled the carriage-roads and bridle-paths. Aristocratic dames were borne in magnificent litters through the laurel and myrtle groves, followed by a train of gaily-attired cavaliers — for the white toga of ancient Rome had long since ceased to be the exclusive costume of these fashionable gallants. Rich manufacturers from Alexandria rolled in the two-wheeled cisium, preceded by woolly-haired runners in bright red garments, side by side with the magnificent carriage of the senator who prided himself on his noble blood and the glittering pony chaise of the woman of the demi monde with her towering coiffure — the “*Libertina*,” of whom Ovid has sung. Wrestling and throwing the discus were practised on the stretches of turf; but the combatants merely played clever tricks on each other — compared with the fierce athletes who had steeled their muscles here

under Tiberius and Caligula — and the discus had grown smaller, as if intended for boys, a symbol of the increasing degeneracy which was finally to succumb to the mighty assault of the victorious German tribes.

Caius Bononius walked through this splendid labyrinth like a somnambulist. Even here, amid the merry, frivolous population of the world's capital, he could not shake off the burden weighing upon his heart and brain. On the evening he met Rutilius he had been on his way to detect the vanity of Olbasanus' arts — and the consequence was that he found himself more than ever ensnared in the net of uncertainty. There was a touch of the tragi comical in this condition of affairs. Bononius, as he paced to and fro, had the vague feeling that he was playing a somewhat pitiful part before himself and the aristocratic company assembled under the maples. . . .

Suddenly some one called him by name.

He turned.

“Is it you, Philippus?” he exclaimed, as a stately man about thirty-six years old approached him from a side-path. The new-comer wore the military dress of a centurion (captain) of the city-prefect; his features expressed resolute will, combined with unmistakable kindness of heart and frankness.

“How are you, Bononius?” asked the soldier, offering the young philosopher his hand. “Are you still alive, or is it only your shade wandering here? By Hercules! it’s at least three months since I last had the pleasure of shaking hands with you. What are you doing, you incomprehensible hermit? Still melting metals on the tripod, or again busied with Heraclitus’ horrible writings? It must be something terrible that estranges you so entirely from your best friends.”

“You are right,” said Bononius. “I

have been unusually busy during the last few months. But you see I'm improving."

They walked on for some distance side by side. The young man liked to listen to the fresh, kindly talk of the sturdy centurion, who now criticised a horse, now spoke of the last races and the newest pantomime, or with blunt originality expressed his admiration of one of the celebrated beauties who passed reclining among the cushions of their litters or calashes.

"Look there!" he said suddenly, checking the torrent of his eloquence. "No, can it be possible? How pale she looks! Don't you know her — Hero, Heliodorus' daughter?"

Caius Bononius started violently. He had never seen the object of Lucius Rutilius' love, much as his thoughts had been occupied with her during the last week. There was no apparent reason for seeking her; nay, by going to the Sicilian's house

he would have frustrated his self-sacrificing friend's expressed wish. But now, since chance had caused this meeting, the young man felt as if he had only needed a glimpse of Hero to obtain a clear insight into all the enigmas that tortured him. He almost devoured with his eyes the lovely girlish figure which, wrapped in the folds of a dazzlingly white palla, was just turning into the elm avenue by the side of a thin young man.

Pretty Hero was indeed pale; pale and sad, despite the faint smile of courtesy that hovered around the small, pouting mouth, and the impression was increased by her thick, light-brown hair, which in a simple, waving line framed the symmetrical brow. She gazed without interest at the motley throng, listened unsympathizingly to the eager words of her excited companion. Behind her, by the side of a fresh, blooming girl of fifteen, whom Caius Bononius

supposed to be the Lydia so often mentioned by Rutilius, walked Heliodorus, the father of the pallid Hero, evidently in an angry mood, for his brows were contracted, his lips tightly compressed. He seemed to be absorbed in an earnest conversation with Lydia.

“Is that Hero?” asked Bononius. “And who is the unattractive fellow talking to her so eagerly?”

“Agathon, a countryman of Heliodorus. I’ve often met him at the city-prefect’s.”

Bononius and Philippus now passed the group. Philippus bowed. Bononius gazed fixedly now at Hero, now at her companion, Agathon. There was something in this man’s appearance which seemed familiar, though he thought he most distinctly remembered that he had never met him before in his life. So he forgot all regard for courtesy, and when Heliodorus had also passed with Lydia, Caius Bononius, spite of

the city custom which forbade such things, could not refrain from gazing after their retreating figures.

When he thus caught a back view of Agathon's form a recollection like a revelation suddenly darted through his brain. That was the same thin figure which, on the evening he was standing with Lucius Rutilius at Olbasanus' door, came out of the ostium* and walked away. The bearing, the peculiar movement of the right shoulder, the whole appearance,— all was unmistakable.

The young man now clearly perceived what had hitherto been as incomprehensible to him as the wondrous nocturnal apparitions — Olbasanus' motives. Everything Olbasanus had predicted to the unhappy Rutilius and sorrowing Hero was by Agathon's direction. The motive that influenced the latter required no explanation.

* Passage leading from the door to the atrium.

Hero was young, beautiful, rich,—and Agathon was a suitor for her favor. Caius Bononius especially emphasized the wealth — it already filled him with satisfaction to be able to despise the aforesaid Agathon more heartily than would have been allowable if his intrigue had been caused solely by a mad passion for the charming young girl.

True, this discovery did not make the incomprehensible things Rutilius and Bononius had witnessed in the Chaldean's house one hair's breadth more intelligible; but Bononius had gained fresh courage and energy to advance, by the employment of every possible means, towards the goal on which, freed from the last remnants of metaphysical doubts, he now boldly fixed his gaze. He was now aware that Olbasanus was no fanatic, no enthusiast who at least partially deceived himself, but a juggler, who served as the tool of the base selfish-

ness of a malicious sneak. This juggler must be unmasked — the youth's determination to do this was as firm as the devotee's faith in the mercy of deity.

The centurion had noticed his companion's agitation and, with his natural frankness and absence of reserve, asked what there was in the Sicilian's appearance to cause so much surprise — had Caius Bononius discovered in Hero some neighbor at the circus, for whom he had long sought in vain, or recognized in Agathon a troublesome rival? The youth was in a mood that renders the heart communicative and desirous of seeking counsel from others; he had long prized the centurion as a reliable and discreet man; besides, he thought he perceived that Philippus also cherished no special regard for Agathon.

One word led to another.

Strolling a little apart from the throng, Bononius at first gave the centurion some

hints and then, after Philippus had sworn by all the gods to maintain the most inviolable secrecy, told him the adventure at Olbasanus's.

The worthy centurion was frantic with indignation. He had never believed in the conjuror's fool-tricks; but here the whole thing was as clear as day: Agathon, the base sharper, had bought Olbasanus! He, Philippus, knew that Agathon's money matters were very much involved. Of course, the extravagant roué thought he could find no better investment for the few hundred sesterces remaining out of many millions than to use them in obtaining the immense heritage Hero, as her mother's only child, would bring as a marriage dowry. The matter was as clear as sunlight. But the insolent cheat had not reaped his harvest yet — and, judging by the expression on Hero's pretty face, Philippus considered it doubtful whether he ever would win what

he wished to sneak into so craftily. No matter: Agathon's probable failure did not make amends for the harm the abominable conjuror had done poor Rutilius. He, Philippus, would do everything in his power, in company with Caius Bononius, to set the affair to rights.

"Come and breakfast with me to-morrow!" he said at last, after mentioning all these points with excited volubility. "We'll sketch the plan of a campaign that will not only restore our worthy Lucius Rutilius to happiness, but satisfy your ardent curiosity about the secret powers with which Olbasanus works."

"Very well," replied Bononius. "I'll be there."

So they parted.

CHAPTER V.

THREE days after the interview between Caius and the centurion the Chaldean sorcerer received a note, trebly sealed, containing the following lines:

“Lydia to the glorious Olbasanus, the confidant of the gods.

“I do not know whether you will still remember me. I crossed your threshold with the fair-haired girl from Syracuse, whom your divine prophecy saved from the most terrible misfortune. Her name is Hero, and she is a daughter of the estimable Heliodorus, who came last year to the strand of Tiber. Filled with admiration for your incomprehensible art, Lydia begs the counsel of the omniscient enchanter in an important and troublesome matter, whose details I cannot confide to you in this letter.

But a fever which, though not dangerous, confines me to my bed prevents my seeking you at your own house. So, worthy Olbasanus, accept in return for your trouble the three hundred denarii the boy will give you with these lines, and come as soon as your leisure will permit to the dwelling of her who seeks knowledge. You know the mansion with the Corinthian *porticus* on the northern slope of the Caelian hill. Tell me, by the slave, whether and when my impatient heart may expect you."

Olbasanus took the gold and wrote three words on one of the numerous strips of parchment which, daintily cut and piled one above another, were lying in a niche in the wall of his room. It was still early — scarcely an hour after sunrise; the conjuror's labors, as a rule, did not begin until after the so-called *prandium*, or second breakfast, and were most numerous during the evening hours. So he could reply

“Will come immediately!” — “for,” he added with courteous phraseology, “Olbasanus knows that he who gives quickly, gives doubly.”

Twenty minutes after Olbasanus's litter, radiant with gold and purple, borne by four coal-black Nubian slaves, stopped in front of Heliodorus's vestibule. Such visits from the soothsayer and magician to aristocratic Roman ladies were neither unusual nor remarkable, though Olbasanus was somewhat chary of granting the favor.

The Chaldean was respectfully received at the door by the chief slave of the atrium, who begged him to excuse the absence of the members of his master's family; Heliodorus had been detained in Antium for several days by important business, and Hero, his daughter, had gone to rest at a late hour and was still asleep.

Olbasanus nodded with the quiet formality of a man accustomed to such phrases,

and allowed himself to be conducted to the large sitting-room under the columns of the peristyle, where Lydia, reclining on a brass lounge, awaited him.

As he crossed the threshold the young Sicilian rose, greeted him with great embarrassment, and requested him to follow her.

Behind the sitting-room was a windowless, oval *exedra** lighted from above — the apartment specially designed for the social chat so greatly prized and enjoyed by the Romans even in later times.

Into this cosy private room Lydia conducted the smiling Oriental, who read in her timid confusion assurance of victory won and fresh triumphs for the future.

But scarcely had the folding doors closed behind Olbasanus, when from the opposite ones three strong Germans rushed in and seized him as a pack of hounds fall upon a

* Drawing-room.

wolf. Spite of his desperate resistance, he was bound; a gag, thrust by the flaxen-haired Frieselanders between his jaws, barely allowed him to breathe.

At the same time Caius Bononius and the centurion Philippus entered the *exedra* by a side door.

“Why do you roll your eyes so, conjuror of Hecate?” said Bononius. “It will be an easy matter for the confidant of all the spirits of the Upper and Lower World to burst these bonds asunder and hurl the criminals who have assailed him lifeless on the floor.”

Spite of the defiant scorn these words were intended to express, the young man's voice had trembled. The glances that flashed from under the Oriental's lashes were so fierce and diabolical, and the memory of the events in the enchanter's house on the Quirinal so fresh, that Bononius could not without emotion see the conquered

man at his feet,—for in the struggle with the slaves Olbasanus had sunk upon his knees.

At a sign from the centurion Philippus, the flaxen-haired Frieselanders now retired through the same door by which they had entered. He himself approached the fettered captive, drew his sword from its sheath, and said in curt, resolute tones:

“ You have been guilty of an execrable crime. Recognize in me a commander of the armed body appointed to guard the welfare of the citizens. I could arrest you now without ceremony. Your fate would be undoubted; since, apart from your offence against Lucius Rutilius and Heliodorus’s daughter, the edicts of former emperors, prohibiting Chaldeans and mathematicians a residence in the seven-hilled city on pain of death, are still in force. That the authorities have been negligent in executing these edicts; that an indulgence

has prevailed of whose injurious results you are the best proof, has little to do with the matter. Yet,—spite of your criminality, I will exercise mercy, if you will punctiliously fulfil two conditions that I shall impose. If you wish to hear them, give me some sign!”

Olbasanus, who at Caius Bononius's words had perceived that his rôle in Rome was played out, after a slight delay bowed his head like a man who submits to the inevitable. The soldier's quiet, resolute manner did not permit him to doubt that Philippus would execute his threat.

Lydia, who had hitherto remained aloof, now advanced a few steps and gazed with timid curiosity at the magician whom, notwithstanding Caius Bononius's repeated admonitions, she still regarded as a sort of supernatural being.

True—the pitiable abjectness which now took the place of his former rage was well calculated to shake this superstitious dread.

“Very well,” said Philippus to Olbasanus, “I’ll release you from the gag, that you may speak. But if you should cry out or attempt to frighten this young girl by magic formulas or any folly of that sort, my blade shall duly repay you for it.”

With these words he removed the gag from the enchanter’s mouth.

“My conditions,” he continued, “are simple enough. You perceive, Olbasanus, that we have discovered the true character of your incredible frauds, but we still lack the key to some of your criminal arts. This youth, who crossed your threshold for the sole purpose of seeing behind the curtain of the nonsensical conjurations with which you deluded people, requires a complete and truthful explanation of everything you did to deceive Hero and Rutilius. If you refuse or lie, our Germans shall drag you to prison this very day. You will also mention the person to whom you sold your-

self for such reprehensible jugglery. The making of these confessions is my first condition. The second is — that you leave Rome before the end of the year. Go to Nicomedia or Alexandria, for aught I care; if these cities will tolerate your presence — and a man of your appearance doesn't pass unobserved — that's your affair. But here in Rome, where you have not only deluded a populace entrusted as it were to my charge, but my best friends, here I oppose to you my threatening sword — woe betide you, if you despise the menace! If you fulfil the task I impose, you shall be dismissed unharmed. Consider quickly and answer without circumlocution."

Olbasanus, with the keen penetration of the Oriental, had instantly perceived the whole situation. He felt that it was not hatred and revenge that roused these men against him, but on the part of one friendship for the basely deceived Lucius Rutilius,

on that of the other feverish curiosity to learn the causes of the mysterious effects, which — he himself did not know how or in what way — had suddenly lost their supernatural character to Caius Bononius. So he thought that by the exercise of a little theatrical talent he could turn the conditions imposed to his own advantage. To leave the seven-hilled city did not seem too painful a sacrifice, for he had long been considering whether it might not be time to collect his riches and, by retiring to the seclusion of private life, escape the danger constantly threatening him from the ancient imperial edicts. Only he needed to remain unmolested until he could accomplish at his leisure this gathering of his means, especially the conversion into money of his considerable landed property, his estates and country houses. So he did not reflect long.

“I’ll confess everything,” he said with a half sarcastic smile, “if you’ll all swear to

keep my acknowledgment secret for six months. You may disclose it only to Lucius Rutilius and Heliodorus's daughter, on condition that they, too, will promise to maintain silence. I will quit the seven-hilled city, too, as the centurion commands ; but I beg as a favor an additional delay of a few months. If you refuse"—here his voice suddenly grew grave and threatening, like the roll of distant thunder,—“by all the horrors of death—I would rather give my neck to the lictor's axe.”

“Grant it to him !” said Bononius, who was burning with impatience.

Philippus consented and, with the young sage and Lydia, took a solemn oath. Then Bononius told the Chaldean, who could only move with difficulty, to sit down on a cushioned couch and answer his questioner with strict conformity to the truth. He himself stood with folded arms directly in front of the couch. Philippus, sword in

hand, stationed himself by the magician's side, while Lydia leaned in breathless expectation over the back of a bronze arm-chair.

"First of all," Caius Bononius began, "tell us one thing: do you believe in the existence of a power in the Nether World, a creature which has some traits akin to the terrible being in whom people believe under the name of Hecate? An answer to this question seems to me valuable, because I should like to know whether you have dared to offend, by the deception of your juggling arts, a divinity in whose power you trusted."

Olbasanus smiled. Now that he had once yielded, he seemed to take the whole matter very quietly and after the fashion of a man of the world, like the Epicurean, who, reclining on the dining-couch in the brilliantly-lighted triclinium, chats about death.

"Sir," he said with aristocratic calmness, "I believe, if not in Hecate, in the existence

of the mighty void she fills. I, who know mankind as a gardener does flowers, assure you: certain things must be systematically devised by us more talented men, if the imagination of the people is not to exhaust itself. Meantime, you might have the kindness to loose my bonds. Our sworn agreement, your superior numbers, and this centurion's sword make the favor appear trivial, and it is more agreeable to philosophize if one is not enduring physical discomfort."

Caius Bononius made no delay in granting this request.

"Very well," he began again when he had freed the magician from his ropes, "so you entirely deny the existence of supernatural beings?"

"I deny nothing—assert nothing. This world is so mysterious, the nature of things is so unfathomable to our intellectual powers, that it would be madness to form a positive

opinion about the possibility or impossibility of a thing which does not come directly within our own experience."

"I won't dispute that. Now for details!"

"You need only question."

"What induced you to send that first message to Heliodorus' daughter? Who bought you?"

"Bought?" repeated the Oriental. "That sounds so unpleasant, Caius Bononius. Prophesying was my ordinary business. Like every one else who practises a profession, I was at the disposal of any one who paid for my art."

"Then, who paid you?"

"Agathon, Philemon's son."

"But you have no scruples about ruthlessly destroying the happiness of two human beings for glittering gold?"

Olbasanus shrugged his shoulders.

“If Hero believed it was thus appointed by fate, the fact was a potent consolation for all the grief of renunciation. Besides — do you know whether this union *was* for their happiness? My oracle interposed, separated two persons who wished to be united: well, this was really the will of fate; for everything that happens is absolutely necessary, and events are strung on the infrangible threads of chance. If you tell me that my prophecy would have destroyed their happiness, I shall answer with equal confidence: it would have saved them from misery.”

“Admirable logic, by Hercules!” replied Bononius. “But we won’t argue about the matter! So Agathon bought — or paid you — Did he tell you his reasons?”

“I did not ask him; but as I knew the man, I guessed them. I knew that Agathon had been on the verge of ruin for several months, and having learned that Hero is

one of the richest heiresses in the seven-hilled city. . . .”

“How did you learn that?”

“Was I to remain ignorant of what hundreds know? I don't keep paid informers in all the fourteen districts for nothing. . . .”

“Very well. So you complied with his request, wrote to Hero, and sent her the mysterious page, which so strangely covered itself with black writing. How is this explained?”

“The mysterious writing can be explained simply enough,” replied Olbasanus. “I prepare from milk, salt water, and a third ingredient, whose combination I invented with great difficulty, a colorless ink which turns black as soon as it is warmed. The page from the book of the god Amun was of course previously written; the heat of the fire produced the miracle that drove the poor, foolish girl to despair.”

“Confoundedly simple, to be sure!” said

the mortified Bononius. "Name the third ingredient."

"How can I designate a nameless thing? It is known only to me; but to explain its preparation. . . ."

"You are right. There are more important things in store for us. First: how could you know that the youth who accompanied me, and whom I only encountered by accident, was Lucius Rutilius? He assures me that he never met you. Did you recognize him?"

"No. But I was daily expecting a visit from him? Besides, Agathon knew him, and Agathon met you as he left my door. While my servant was leading you by a roundabout way to the hall of conjuration, Agathon hurriedly returned and informed me of Rutilius's immediate arrival."

"Yet the servant could not possibly foresee that it would be for your interest to

delay our arrival. So why did he choose that way?"

"It is the rule. All strangers pass through those corridors; only those who come on errands, like Agathon, are conducted directly to my rooms."

"I understand," said Bononius. "But suppose — we had *not* met Agathon?"

"Then it would undoubtedly have cost me more trouble to ascertain the personality of your companion — and I should have performed other miracles."

"How did it happen that the candelabra around were lighted when you raised your wand?"

"Their stands are hollow. The lamps are already burning very low within the columns. A thick wire screen shuts off the reflection they would otherwise cast on the ceiling. When I raise the wand, my assistant behind the curtains turns an iron wheel which moves machinery that pushes the

lamps up from the floor, opens the screens, and turns up the wicks."

"Go on!" said Bononius. "The metallic sound your wand drew from the altar. . . .?"

"Was produced by a copper basin concealed inside. A boy sits in front of it with an iron rod."

"I supposed it was something of the kind. But now: the sudden fall of the victim! Does the hidden boy have a hand in the game here, too?"

"Here, too!" replied the magician. "In the side of the altar is a small movable plate, which is covered with a thin layer of common salt. As soon as the animal finds its head near this plate, it begins, according to natural instinct, to lick it. When I give the sign, the boy, with a sudden push, drives the plate into an opening of the same size made in the marble, the space it formerly occupied being filled with a second plate,

also covered with salt, which, however, is mixed with a poison whose action is instantaneous. The results you have seen."

"But suppose the lamb doesn't accommodate you?" said the centurion. "Suppose it should be tired, or satiated, or obstinate?"

"That is provided for. The animal is deprived a long time of its favorite dainty. At the worst I incurred no risk. If the trick failed, it remained a secret; the animal could then be killed as every priest slays his victim."

"You took out the heart and liver," Bononius continued, "I watched you with the utmost care. You held the wand in your right hand all the time that the entrails were in your left; so the writing that so completely robbed Rutilius of his self-command could not have come from the staff. Far less could the animal have had a liver ready inscribed in its body. How did this incredible thing occur?"

“It was not done with the right hand which carried the wand,” replied Olbasanus smiling, “but with the left, in which I held the liver.”

“Impossible!”

“Understand me correctly. Before you entered the hall the word ΘΑΝΑΤΟΣ was written in inverted characters on the palm of my left hand with a black fluid specially prepared for the purpose. The moist liver eagerly absorbed this fluid and when I laid it on the plate, the miracle was accomplished.”

A long pause ensued. The ridiculous simplicity of this apparently incomprehensible marvel, and the bold assurance displayed by the Chaldean produced a startling effect. Even Lydia now felt ashamed of having so long shared poor Hero's terror and of only having given her consent after much fear and hesitation to the plan which was to unmask the magician.

“A masterpiece certainly!” said Bononius almost furiously. “It ought not to surprise me now if I should learn that your talking skull was a vision of mist or smoke! To be sure, things are not simple until they are understood. But we’ll keep to the regular order of events! I don’t ask about the peals of thunder and flashes of lightning; such things may be heard and seen, though far more imperfectly, even at the performances of foolish pantomimes. But how do you explain the ghostly motion that arose in the brazier of coals? It was an amazing phenomenon.”

“In the bottom of the brazier was a sheet of alum, which, melting and bubbling from the heat, imparted its own movements to the coals.”

“Now for the skull. Its speech was deceptive — as distinct as your own voice is now.”

“It was the voice of an assistant. A

tube led from the floor into the skull. The assistant spoke into it below, so the words seemed to proceed directly from the skull."

"And its disappearance?"

"Was caused by melting. The skull was modelled of wax and the plates of the niche were heated from below."

"But it was not seen. . . ."

"You saw nothing distinctly," interrupted Olbasanus. "Unperceived by you, a curtain of thin Coan gauze shut off the niche, thus rendering the illusion less difficult. A similar effect was afterwards produced outside in the grounds by the interlaced network of the branches behind which the fire-showering Hecate passed across the sky."

"Explain this flaming Hecate!"

The Chaldean laughed heartily, then said in a tone of strange sarcasm :

"Pardon me ; but it is a singular fatality that my most effective masterpiece always

arouses my laughter. I have seen hundreds of credulous folk prostrate themselves on the circle of turf in my grounds and, covering their faces, moan and groan aloud as the horrible phenomenon rose in the dark sky. And yet—or perhaps it is for that very reason . . . the contrast is too sharp. This Hecate, who apparently passes with frantic haste across the firmament, is nothing but a poor kite wrapped in blazing tow. One of my assistants looses the unfortunate creature,—which is prevented from screaming by a tightly-drawn leather strap,—through a huge pipe, twenty ells long. The tortured bird thus keeps the direction it has taken. Before the tow goes out, the kite has reached the place where it ceases to be visible. Deceived by the branches of the numerous trees, the awed beholders imagine the fiery image is far away in the realms of air and attribute to it gigantic size and supernatural speed—just as the eye, when

gazing into vacancy, mistakes a fly buzzing close by for the dimly-seen shadow of a huge bird. This, oh! Bononius, is Hecate, the Ruler of us all, the Princess of Darkness, the horrible tyrant of the Nether World."

"Enough," said Caius Bononius. "I now see that we all have some trace of the mighty demon that is your most powerful ally—the fiend called superstition and human folly. I, too, confess myself guilty, under the impressions you conjured up before us, of having been led astray from the convictions obtained by long years of arduous labor. I am a human being and may say with the poet; I consider nothing strange that is human, not even mortal weaknesses and errors. But you, Olbasanus, ought to fear the awakening tortures of your conscience! Summoned by virtue of your unmistakable penetration to be a guide to erring humanity, to lighten the darkness of

its errors, and bring it to the truth, you do not disdain to profit by its weaknesses, like the miserable robber who plunders a sick and defenceless man. Leave us — or I shall be seized with loathing and forget my promise. Other feelings ought to rule my soul now — above all, joy at the happy turn in the fate of your deceived victims.”

“I will go,” replied Olbasanus. “It is cheap and convenient to accuse me of crime. But I ask one question, Caius Bononius: how many of the countless throng that follow me along the road of error would be my companions, if I attempted to lead them with earnestness and zeal into the domain of truth? One in a thousand! Delusion is brilliant and magnificent; its sultry breezes intoxicate; the air on the heights of truth blows keen and cold, and humanity is a poor, freezing beggar.”

Caius Bononius unceremoniously turned his back upon the speaker, and Olbasanus,

holding his head proudly erect, left the *exedra*.

* * *

Six weeks later, early in the month of December, Heliodorus' house glittered in the splendor of festal array. Garlands of leaves and flowers twined around the Corinthian pillars; countless lamps adorned the wide halls of the atrium and peristyle. A select company attired in fashionable costume, ladies in gaily-flowered pallas, with glittering diadems and gold pins among their curls, senators in purple-bordered holiday robes, rich merchants in Tyrian syntheses, and laurel-crowned poets, thronged the gleaming colonnades. Heliodorus was celebrating the marriage of his daughter Hero to Lucius Rutilius. The worthy Bononius, who had not shrunk from taking the long journey to distant Massilia to bring his friend back to the scene of his newly-

restored happiness, was treated by the bride with almost greater attention than she bestowed upon the bridegroom — an incomprehensible enigma — and Lucius Rutilius, far from being seized with jealousy at this apparent neglect, also strove to show the young philosopher every token of the most cordial affection. Caius Bononius was evidently absent-minded. His heart had for some time been divided between satisfaction at the successful breaking of the spell which had weighed upon Hero and Rutilius, and another feeling that had ripened during the few days of his intercourse with Lydia. How it happened was doubtless known to Eros, the sole enchanter in whose omnipotence the sceptical Bononius found himself henceforth compelled to believe. In short, the young man desired nothing better than to gaze into Lydia's deep, dark eyes, listen to her voice, or brush against her flowing stola while walking through the colonnades

of the peristyle. Considering his past, it was extremely unphilosophical—but the fact could not be denied.

Rutilius' wedding afforded him ample opportunity to satisfy his longing in this respect. Lydia, too, who had at first been merely an admirer of his faithful friendship and untiring energy, gradually passed into another mood. After Hero's departure from her father's house the young girl felt strangely lonesome. . . . When she fancied that it would be very delightful if she, too, like Heliodorus' daughter, could have a home of her own where she might rule as the wife of a handsome, wise, talented man, this imaginary husband unconsciously assumed the features of Caius Bononius So it was not one of the greatest marvels that Eros ever accomplished when, the following April, Bononius and Lydia were married.

Previous to this event, however, the aristocrats of the seven-hilled city were startled

by two pieces of news which for a long time formed the topic of daily conversation. One was the sudden disappearance of the Chaldean magician, who had sold all his estates, as well as the palace furnished with Oriental splendor on the Quirinal, and left Rome without bidding any one farewell; the other was the suicide of Agathon, who had opened his veins in the warm bath of his own house, which had been mortgaged far beyond its value.



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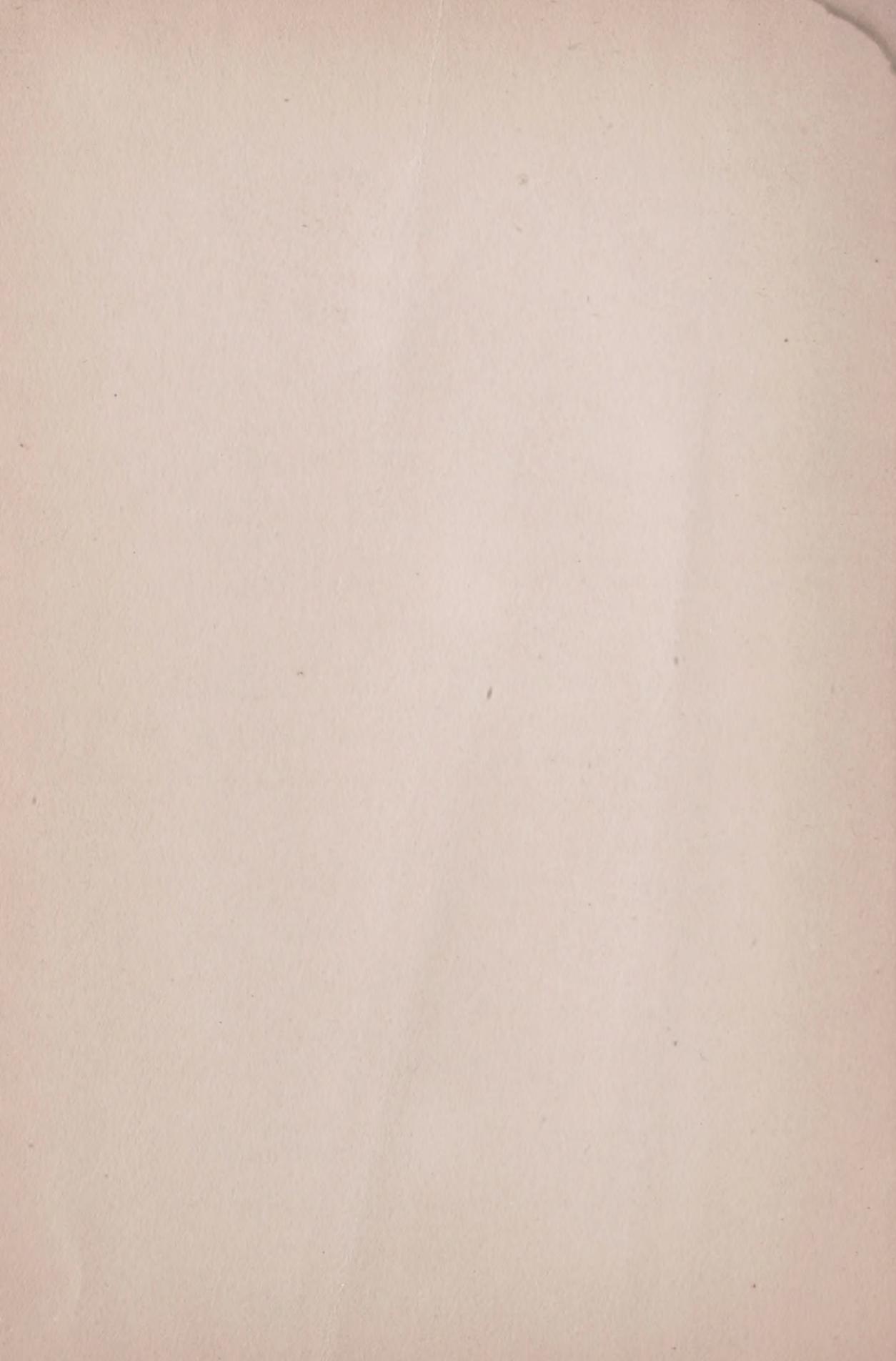
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